

Attacking the right to ask

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The thousand-strong gathering at the Theological College grounds in Ranchi on June 10 had no doubts over why Lalit Mehta was killed. The 36-year-old engineer turned activist, had no personal enemies or battles. He was a prominent member of The Right to Food Campaign, working in the Vikas Sahyog Kendra in Palamou District, Jharkhand. All he had done was access National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) expenditure records for researchers verifying official records against field data. On May 14, a day before the planned Social Audit of those works, he was brutally murdered. His face was disfigured, and his body badly mutilated. A diabolical warning to those who question.

The police, with unseemly haste, buried the unidentified body, carrying it back 25 kilometres to the scene of the crime, after a hurriedly conducted post-mortem. But the murder did not stop the research. Twelve days later, the social audit established that a large proportion of the Rs 73 crore spent in the district had been siphoned off by contractors, officials and the well-entrenched development mafia. The people of Palamou knew that their entitlements were being pocketed by the corrupt. But they have been helpless victims.